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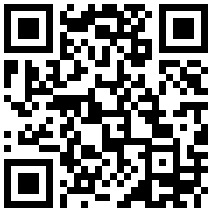

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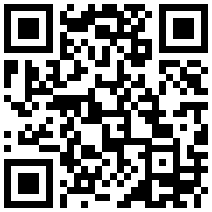

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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.
UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM.

IF PUBLIC LIBRARIES, WHY NOT PUBLIC MUSEUMS?

BY

EDWARD S. MORSE,
Director of the Peabody Academy of Sciences.

From the Report of the U. S. National Museum for 1893, pages 769-780.

WASHINGTON:
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE.
1895.

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769

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IF PUBLIC LIBRARIES, WHY NOT PUBLIC MUSEUMS?*

By Edward S. Morse.

The success which has accompanied the public library act in Massachusetts encourages the friends of science to believe that the time is propitious for establishing public museums in the smaller towns of the Commonwealth. It certainly is time to direct public attention to the importance of the museum as an adjunct to the public library. The tendencies of modern public-school education which introduce Sloyd as part of its work, and ask for pictures and casts to decorate the barren schoolroom, are indications that the time is ripe to found, in a modest way, museums of science, art, and history in our smaller towns and villages.

A few devoted students have in past times endeavored to establish institutions of this kind, but in most instances their efforts have been abortive. A few larger cities in the country have managed to keep alive the interest manifested, and their museums are now permanently established. The failures, however, have outnumbered the successes ten to one, and for this there must be a reason.

The founding of a museum is far more difficult than that of a library. People are trained to the latter in the development of a private library; and one capable of cataloguing books can establish a small library. The furniture is reduced to the simplest expression in the form of a case of shelves. The material to be put upon them can readily be ordered from the nearest book mart. On the other hand, the building of a museum requires special gifts and special training. Besides, one thoroughly imbued with the spirit of a collector should have charge of a museum, though this is equally true in regard to libraries of any magnitude. The absence of a public demand for museums in the past has arisen from the methods of public instruction. Lessons from books, and not from nature, have been the tiresome lot of school children. Questions and answers, cut and dried, have tended to deaden the inquiring spirit. That portion of a child's brain which is involved in

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observation has been reduced to atrophy by the usual public-school methods. A distinguished English authority suggests to school boards, high and low, "that the teaching is out of all proportion in excess of the training, the latter being with difficulty weighed in the scales of school examination." Agassiz said: "The pupil studies nature in the schoolroom, and when he goes out of doors he can not find her." I shall never forget the bitter disappointment I felt as a boy, on my first journey, when the stage driver pointed out to me with his whip the dividing line between the States of Maine and New Hampshire. There was no colored line! There was no change in the color surfaces of the two sides! I felt grieved and rebellious at the imposition which had been practiced upon me. Nor can I ever forget the surprise—my delight was distracted by the novelty of my ignorance—when my father, in one of the periodic family drives, chanced to remark, on a shore road near Portland, that the water expanse before us was the Atlantic Ocean. Had he said that one of the islands in sight was Madagascar, I should not have been more astonished. Every one can recall experiences of a similar nature, and I venture to believe that these two truthful incidents are pertinent examples of the results of pernicious educational methods universal forty years ago and by no means uncommon to-day—book-cramming, with no reference to the objects or illustrations in sight from the windows, or within stone's throw of the school door. This undeniable condition of many schools in the land emphasizes the necessity of museums where the objects may verify some of the lessons learned at school. The book method of education has almost paralyzed public desire for museums, and the result has been that the museum, when instituted, has been in the interest of specialists, and mainly through their efforts. The whole animal kingdom may be epitomized, in a manner, between the covers of a single book; the specimens properly to illustrate such a book would require a good-sized hall in which to be displayed.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has liberally provided a way in which every town may have a collection of books free to all. So successfully has the enactment been carried out that only 3 per cent of the State's population is unprovided with a free public library, and this remnant will soon be favored with its public stock of standard books. This is all very well, and in the right direction; but is it not possible to create a similar public sentiment for the establishment of some kind of a museum as a proper accompaniment of the library? If there is the slightest necessity for a museum in the crowded metropolis, why does not the same necessity hold good for the small town or village? In the Public Libraries Act of England and Ireland (1855), provision is made for the erection of buildings "suitable for public libraries or museums, or both, or for schools of science and art;" and a similar act for Scotland (1867) provides for the erection of buildings "suitable for public libraries, art galleries, or museums, or each, respectively." Every community, borough, district, or parish exceeding five

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thousand in population may, by a two-thirds majority, adopt the Public Libraries Act, and a sum not exceeding a penny in a pound may be levied for carrying out the provisions of the act.

Thomas Greenwood, the author of a special work on museums and art galleries, expresses his belief that "the museum of the future must stand side by side with the library and the laboratory, as a part of the teaching equipment of the college and the university, and in the great cities cooperate with the public library as one of the principal agencies for the enlightenment of the people."

Prof. Goode, the officer in charge of the U. S. National Museum, says:

> I am confident, also, that a museum, wisely organized and properly arranged, is certain to benefit the library near which it stands in many ways through its power to stimulate interest in books, thus increasing the general popularity of the library and enlarging its endowment.

England discovered that art schools were not sufficient to place her art manufactures on a level with those of her continental competitors, and was forced to supplement her schools with museums of art handiwork, and the large endowment granted the South Kensington Museum was fully justified by the results shown in the great exhibition of 1867. A museum seems as much an integral part of the public library as are the experiments part of a lecture on chemistry or physics. If the public library is established primarily for educational purposes, surely the public museum should come in the same category. The potency of an object in conveying information beyond all pages of description is seen in the fact that in the museum a simple label associated with a veritable object is often sufficient to tell the story at a glance; the eye seizes the essentials at once.

The rapid development of the modern arts of illustration, and the conspicuous use of these methods in books, magazines, dictionaries, and even the daily papers, attest the power of the pictorial art, barbarous as it is in many cases, in imparting information quickly and clearly. If illustrations are so important in the modern publication—and to do without them would seem well-nigh impossible—how far more important it would seem to be to provide an exhibition of the objects themselves in science, art, and history, to which the public might have free access.

A museum adds dignity to a trifle. What seems a worthless object to the minds of the multitude becomes at once endowed with interest when carefully framed or mounted, and clearly labeled. Furthermore, the object is seen to have a definite relation to other equally common objects with which it is associated; a lesson is learned, and sooner or later the observer finds an added interest in his studies, if indeed he is not aware for the first time of regions of thought utterly unknown to him before. The charm that attends the demonstration of the minor factors of natural selection comes from the love of causality, a desire which, as Peschel truly says, accounts for the intellectual supremacy of Europe over the great Asiatic nations lying east of her.

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Charles Kingsley, in an address to workingmen, said:

> You must acquire something of that industrious habit of mind which the study of natural science gives—the art of comparing, of perceiving true likenesses and true differences, and so of classifying and arranging what you see—the art of connecting facts together in your mind in cause and effect.

The public museum fosters the art of collecting; and of all habits to encourage, in the young and old alike, the habit of collecting is one of the best. It has been said that one who does not learn to play whist is laying up a dismal old age; the same might be said of one who has not cultivated the collector's spirit. It induces habits of neatness, order, and skill, says one writer. Young people are kept out of mischief; to middle-aged people it is a rest and relaxation, and old people find in their collections a perennial source of pleasure.

Prof. Goode quotes an eminent English lecturer as stating that our nation is deteriorating in regard to culture; that where, twenty years ago, five hundred towns supported, year after year, courses of lectures on scientific and literary subjects, to-day scarcely fifty of these places feel encouraged to continue the effort. If there is no apparent reason for this decadence, then it will be well-nigh useless to hope for the establishment of museums. If, however, it can be shown that with the advent of the lecture bureau the market was flooded with poor or sensational lecturers, comic readers, etc., and as a result the lecture platform, as we formerly knew it, became converted into an amusement stage; if, furthermore, it can be shown that the magazine literature of the country gives far greater space to matters of science and art, thus providing the kinds of intellectual food formerly given from the lecture platform, then we may hope that there is no decadence in the culture of the people, and that an interest in public museums may be easily aroused.

A change has certainly taken place in the last thirty years in the tendency of the community toward collecting objects of natural history. Private collectors of shells, insects, birds, etc., were far more numerous thirty years ago than they are to-day. The same is true of England. An eminent authority laments that "private collections are failing in Liverpool and all around; and teaching is everywhere hard and hardening in its results." Yet there is surely no dying out of the collector's spirit in certain lines, as witness the thousands interested in postage-stamp collecting, with their established societies and periodicals.

To awaken a desire in the smaller towns for a public museum, it is needful that a good example be cited. To see examples of any kind, one must go up to the great cities to find them. For New England the fingers of one hand could almost count them, and for the rest of this great Republic, outside of college museums, the fingers of the other hand would be sufficient to keep tally.

If we examine into the character of these museums, we shall find that, with some notable exceptions, they stand where they did before

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Darwin's time. The museum then, as now, consisted of accumulations of species of animals that were of interest only to specialists in their respective branches of study. The interest attaching to such collections was incomprehensible to the layman. He strayed through a museum bewildered by cases filled with apparently similar kinds of shells, insects, and the like. The insects were always in their mature state. Not a suggestion of the life history of even a single species could be found. Regiments of shells were marshaled in pasteboard trays, with no inkling of the kind of life associated with them. The collection of birds gave no hint of the quaint appearance of the young, or of the infinite variety in the construction of their nests. As to whether the creatures ever laid eggs could be ascertained only by going to some other part of the hall. The schoolbooks of the time gave no idea of the way in which these collections might be studied; and if by chance the text-book had a more thoughtful chapter on morphology or other point of view, the museum might be ransacked in vain for an illustration. If one chanced to have a general book on natural history, it told him about the elephant and the kangaroo, which he already knew by name, at least, through the lines of a popular ditty, but not a word of the little creatures that hid under his own doorstep. The museum might have a small collection of mammals, but to find a complete collection of those of his own State he would have to go to the museums of the Old World.

Within recent years a great change has taken place, in this and some other respects, in the large museums of the country, notably in Boston, Cambridge, Salem, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington; but advances are yet to be made in some of these museums to bring their collections abreast of the knowledge of to-day. Prof. Goode insists that the "museum of the past must be set aside, reconstructed, transformed from a cemetery of bric-a-brac into a nursery of living thoughts."

That the importance of a museum of some kind connected with the larger schools has been realized in the past is seen in the custom of every country academy and female seminary which sets apart a room for the purposes of a school museum. But no more ingenious device could have been planned to create a loathing for museums in the minds of the young than those wretched travesties called "cabinets of natural history." With few exceptions they were dismal failures. The scant collections rarely contained anything belonging to the surrounding country, unless it might be a moth-eaten owl, a plethoric paper wasps' nest, or a horseshoe crab from the nearest seacoast; clutter, dust, and disorder, and poorly executed labels, usually written with a hard lead pencil on the bluest of writing paper, and all concealed in cases, the wood of whose doors generally exceeded the glass in superficial area. This description applies not only to the class of schools above mentioned, but to many of the large institutions of learning as well. Even to-day there are many colleges and universities that have no museums,

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and others that would be better off if deprived of the wretched apologies they have. A prominent Western university has a museum literally bathed in soot, the most instructive features of which are the foot-tracks of various insects delicately traced on the soot-laden shelves. I mention these facts not in a way of reproach, but to emphasize an important truth, and that is that the creating of a proper museum requires the services of one endowed with special taste and talent for the work. A man may be an excellent collector and systematist, but disorderly to the last degree. As a collector and specialist he may have made a record; but museum work demands more than these qualifications. One must have the power of clearly illustrating truths in science by the proper and adequate display of specimens. Labels must be neatly, clearly, and concisely drawn. A hand-made label, if well done, is better than a printed one. Prof. Goode, to whom we are greatly indebted for numerous essays and addresses on museum matters, has said with truth that "*an efficient educational museum may be described as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well-selected specimen.*"

But we anticipate. The importance of the museum as an adjunct of the public library having been indicated, the pre-Darwinian condition of many of the smaller and some of the larger museums having been shown, we come now to consider the question, What kind of a museum may properly be demanded as the working companion of a public library? Museums are almost as varied in their character as human knowledge. There are zoological, anatomical, botanical, mineralogical, geological, paleontological, ethnological, archæological museums; historical museums of art and armor; museums of architecture, terrestrial and marine; industrial museums; museums showing the history of a nation, such as the wonderful one at Nuremberg; museums solely to commemorate the work of great men, as the Thorwaldsen Museum at Copenhagen; museums, again, limited in scope to the last degree, as seen in the unique one at Berlin, illustrating the history and development of the postal service. Obviously, not one of these various museums would answer to parallel the public library; but an epitome of all of them would answer the purpose completely, were it possible to bring the material together. And such an epitome is within the reach of any well-ordered community willing to spend a portion of its library endowment for such a collection.

Thomas Greenwood, of England, in his work already alluded to, summarizes the main objects of a public museum as follows: First, that it provide rational amusement of an elevating character to the ordinary visitor; second, that it be in the fullest sense an educational institution, easily accessible to all classes; third, that it provide a home for examples of local objects of interest of an antiquarian, geological, or other character; fourth, that a section of it be a commercial museum, containing specimens of manufactures resembling those produced in the

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immediate locality; fifth, that it be one in a series of institutions whose object shall be to further the education of the many and the special studies of the few. The section that Mr. Greenwood devotes to a commercial museum would be far better devoted to objects of art. The commercial products of a community are always accessible, and every recurring State or county fair makes full display of the material, with the machinery and men producing it in full operation.

In a committee's report, made to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, upon the provincial museums of the United Kingdom, it is stated:

> The special objects of a free rate-supported museum in a provincial town should be—
> (1) To contribute its share to the general scientific statistics of the country by collecting and preserving specimens of the natural and artificial productions of the district in which it is situated.
> (2) To procure such other specimens as may be desirable for illustrating the general principles of science, and the relations of the locality to the rest of the world.
> (3) To receive and preserve local collections or single specimens, having any scientific value, which the possessors may desire to devote to public use.
> (4) So to arrange and display the specimens collected as to afford the greatest amount of popular instruction consistent with their safe preservation and accessibility as objects of scientific study.
> (5) To render special assistance to local students and teachers of science.

F. T. Mott, esq., a member of the above-mentioned committee, in a paper read before the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, on the "development of museums as public educators," says:

> Museums, free libraries, and art galleries have this in common: that they are each expected to fulfill two purposes which are somewhat incongruous, and require to be pursued by different methods and with different appliances. Each of these institutions is expected to minister to the wants both of trained students and of the untrained and ignorant public; and the demands of these two classes of persons are so diverse that they must be provided for separately. The free library must have its lending department for the general public, and its reference department for students. The art gallery must have attractive and interesting pictures for ordinary visitors, but it must also have masterly studies for the instruction of young artists. The museum, however, has a still more complex and difficult part to play. It has not only to provide for the diverse wants of students and of visitors, but it has also to contribute to the general progress of scientific knowledge. Every museum, at least every provincial rate-supported museum, which is a public and in some sense a national institution, has a threefold duty: (1) to the nation at large, (2) to the students of the neighborhood, and (3) to the local public. If museums are ever to be more than a confused compound of the curiosity shop and the peep show, which is what very many of them are at present, this threefold duty must be very clearly recognized, and means must be found for the efficient carrying on of each department.

First and foremost, then, the town museum should illustrate the natural products of the immediate region. By natural products is meant, of course, the animals, plants, rocks, and minerals found in the county, or possibly in the State, for a county collection would require but a few extra-limital forms to compass the State; second, a general collection of similar material from elsewhere, to show the relation of the country to the rest of the world. Anatomical, physiological, and

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morphological series should next find place in such a museum. The minor factors of natural selection, such as protective, alluring, and warning coloration, mimicry, etc., should be illustrated, as far as possible, from collections made in the immediate neighborhood. And finally, a series of forms to show the phyllogenetic development of the animal kingdom should in some way be given. Such a series would require large floor space, and the solution of many perplexing problems as to form of cases and methods of display. Yet a scheme of this sort must ultimately be devised. The importance of developmental series is clearly brought out by a comparison between the famous Cluny Museum in Paris and the University Museum at Oxford under the charge of Prof. E. B. Tylor. In the former is a homogeneous mass of beautiful and elaborate objects of mediæval times, each exciting thought so disjointed that fatigue soon ensues from the rich surfeit, and one comes away with the feeling that he has seen a marvelous lot of most exquisite objects in the dim light of an artistic receptacle. Not an emotion has been evoked that will be set vibrating again unless he drops into a choice bric-a-brac shop, and the medley there seen pleases him less in its *ensemble* than that of the Cluny collections; with the advantage, however, that he can buy, if he has the means, and not burn with envy. The Pitt-Rivers collection now displayed in the Oxford Museum arrests the thoughtful attention at every step; inquiry is provoked at every turn; doubt may be engendered, yet ever after one finds fertile subjects to think about, to discuss, or to impart to one's friends. In other words, the collection has stimulated inquiry; and this is what a properly arranged collection should always do.

This, then, is a general idea of what a public museum should be. It has been attained in part by the Peabody Academy of Science in Salem. The collections comprise, first, a remarkable series of the animals and plants, rocks, minerals, and archæological specimens collected in the county of Essex. These collections are continually increasing as new forms are added. They occupy upright cases to an extent of over three hundred running feet, or a superficial area for their display of nearly three thousand square feet. Besides this there is an epitome collection of the animal kingdom, brought from all parts of the world, requiring an area of sixteen hundred square feet for its proper display; and, finally, an ethnological collection, arranged by countries, filling a hall 60 by 48 feet, with broad galleries and spacious cases. These collections are all fully and clearly labeled. At close intervals throughout the entire collection special colored labels are displayed, calling attention, by title and shelf number, to books in the public library referring to the immediate group, so that a student or pupil from the public schools need only transcribe on a bit of paper a set of numbers and present it at the delivery window of the public library to be provided at once with the books on the special subject desired. Great credit is due to Mr. Robinson, in charge of the museum, for the good taste

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shown in the arrangement of the collection, and to Mr. Jones, the librarian of the public library, for cooperating so heartily in the work of the academy.

Courses of lectures are given in the academy hall every year, which are practically free to the public. The city librarian usually supplements these lectures by printed lists of books treating of the subject-matter of the lecture, and these lists are distributed to the auditors. A like service is often done for the free courses of lectures given by the Essex Institute. In this manner these three institutions cooperate with one another in utilizing the collections in their possession in an educational way, and for the good of the general public. The collections thus made available are the results of years of devoted labor by many ardent students and collectors.

Is it to be supposed that other communities may call into existence even a limited collection of objects for a museum, as they might bring together the material for a public library? With any reasonable appropriation of money this can be done. At the present time there are many reputable firms which stand ready to furnish, at reasonable prices, collections representing the various departments of science. All the mercantile features of a museum, such as cases, adjustable brackets, tablets, insect boxes, jars, etc., can be got from the proper sources. If a public library has its salaried officer and assistants, and buys its books, why should not a public museum be installed under precisely similar conditions? There is no reason, save the fact that most of the museums in the country have had a fortuitous beginning, usually due to a coterie of men directly interested in science who, bringing together collections of interest, have been generous enough to permit the public to enjoy them on certain days in the year. In some cases a large endowment has enabled the society to share its treasures with the public more freely. But we are digressing. With the facilities thus indicated for purchasing material, a definite plan is to be laid out, upon which the collections are to be brought together. An epitome collection of the animal kingdom, large or small as the case may be, is to be secured. This will come to hand properly prepared, mounted and labeled. Having obtained this, the museum has the models upon which to prepare the local collection. Home talent will have to be looked to for this material; and if none are found competent to do the work, a collector from elsewhere must be employed for the purpose. The initial steps having been taken, the lines are indicated along which it is possible to utilize the voluntary aid of such collectors as the community may possess, although the museum of to-day can not depend upon voluntary service entirely. Special private collections of shells, insects, minerals, archæological relics, etc., will naturally gravitate toward the public museum, either by gift or by purchase; and thus, slowly but surely, the foundations of a museum will have been fairly started.

Finally, in the museum of the future the errors of the past should be

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avoided. Private collections, when given to a museum, must be incorporated with the other collections. Collections should not be accepted with the condition that they are to have separate rooms or cases for their display. There are occasions when an exception can be made; as when, for instance, the collection is far more complete than the one already possessed, though in this case the smaller collection should be merged with the larger. An inconvenience has always arisen from the continual accession of material which necessitates the rearranging of collections for their admission. This difficulty can be overcome by setting apart a special room or a set of cases in which the donations can be kept for one year, this receptacle to be plainly marked "new accessions to the museum." In this way a rearrangement, and consequent disturbance, takes place only once a year. Furthermore, the exhibition of these accessions separately will stimulate the activity and pride of local collectors and others interested.

Above all, the bane and misery of dubious accumulations should be avoided. A specimen is either of use, or it is not. If worthy of preservation, it should find its place in the collections; if not, it should be transferred to those who will make use of it, or be destroyed. The rubbish which accumulates in many of our museums and is hoarded from year to year with the hope that it may some time be of use is paralleled by the collections of junk with which some are inclined to encumber their premises.

That some kind of a public museum, along the lines and in the ways above suggested, is possible for smaller towns there is no doubt. A wholesome spirit of rivalry might naturally arise, and each town having its museum would excel in certain departments, in the same way that each town can pride itself on certain special features, such as a fine park, spacious town hall, public library, or superior high school building. Unfortunate, indeed, is that town—and there are hundreds of them in this country—that can show nothing but the mere elements of material existence; in this respect not a whit removed from the barrenness of a sheep pasture. To bring up young children in such a town is to stunt their intellectual powers, and to narrow persistently the horizon of their life.

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